Heidegger and Peer Pressure:
Falling, Inauthenticity, and Authenticity

TAYLOR M. DIX

Consider a typical bright, young elementary school student. He raises his hand to answer every question; he knows trivial facts that are not on tests; his classmates might even label him a "nerd" or a "geek." After a time, his classmates give him the reputation of being the "smartest kid in the class." Moving on to junior high school, the school enrolls him in the advanced, enriched, or gifted classes. Here, he excels at math and science, just as he does in the rest of his classes. As he enters high school, he will undoubtedly take advanced placement or other college-level math and science classes. Soon the decision is upon him: where should he attend college? And, just as important, what major should he pick? The cacophony of counselors', friends', relatives', and classmates' voices now begins to exert its influence. "You should go into engineering because you're good at math," one counselor might say. Fellow classmates who have achieved a high level of academic excellence also elect to pursue an engineering degree. Our student, like many others, feels compelled to follow his friends' examples, out of the fear that any other decision might bring condescending remarks, i.e., "Why are you majoring in philosophy? Don't waste your college education getting a history degree—what can you do with that?!" Inevitably, our student, almost without serious thought or deliberation, decides to pursue an engineering degree in college.

Taylor M. Dix is a senior at Brigham Young Univeristy majoring in philosophy and history, with a minor in Chinese studies. After graduation in April 2004, he is planning on pursuing graduate degrees in philosophy and law.

Why did our student choose this specific course of action? The simplest explanation is that he fell to peer pressure. He had been told, starting in elementary school, that smart kids with good math grades should go into engineering. Being an engineer, put simply, is just *what one does* in our society when one has a natural inclination towards mathematics and the sciences. After graduating from college, our student will likely have a desk job, doing what engineers do, and will lead a contented life. His happiness stems from the fact that he is doing what society has told him a person with his characteristics should do. Unfortunately, such a worldview has permeated the psyche of every individual in modern society; today's world is driven by peer pressure and a fear of disappointing one's peers. Thus, one's major life choices are validated and controlled by field-specific "experts" who analyze and predict everything, and whose opinions are often elevated to dogma. Contemporary philosophers have tried to explain the foundations of this phenomenon, and Martin Heidegger, in his seminal work *Being and Time*, calls this trait of human nature—following the dictates of the public conscience instead of creating an individual lifestyle—*falling*. The question follows, is man naturally predisposed towards this mode of living? This essay will use Heidegger's phenomenology to answer that man *is* naturally predisposed towards falling, thus creating an inauthentic life. Furthermore, I will argue that only continual resistance to falling can bring one out of the default state of inauthenticity into an authentic mode of living.

Before advancing further, a distinction must be made between Heidegger's two approaches on falling. Scholars generally recognize two forms of falling within Heidegger's writings: structural and psychological.[1] The former is Heidegger's term for showing how Dasein (Heidegger's ontological label for man) is naturally drawn away from its inherent sense of what it truly is.[2] The latter can be interpreted as a "turning-away," the result of Dasein's temptation to ignore the facts that it has to create its own

---

[1] For a complete discussion of this dichotomy, please see Dreyfus 225–237 and 283–340, Carman 13–28, and Dreyfus's response to Carman's article on 306–309 of the same book.
[2] Dreyfus 225.

lifestyle and that its world is entirely contingent and groundless.[3] I will examine only the structural account of Heideggerian falling.

Falling—Definition

Prior to understanding how falling affects Dasein, one must first comprehend the environment wherein Dasein is, in each case, found. Heidegger claims that a world is a necessary condition for the existence of Dasein. He writes, "[For] Dasein, Being in a world is something that belongs essentially."[4] However, one must not mistake Heidegger's concept of a world for the conventional use of the word. Instead of the conglomeration of physical objects that one encounters in everyday life, Heidegger's world is the sum of all meaningful objects and persons *and* the relationships one maintains with them. Thus, no intelligible world exists wherein Dasein is the sole inhabitant; the existence of every world presupposes the existence of material objects and other Dasein. Interaction as a constituent part of Dasein's nature, then, rises to the forefront of its basic existence.[5] Falling and inauthenticity are derivative modes of this interaction. One can either choose to interpret the world in an individual manner or follow the public conscience—that of *das Man* in Heideggerian terms. *Das Man*, also referred to as "the one" by Dreyfus and "the they" in the Macquarrie-Robinson translation, is the entity that creates, maintains, and demands conformity to social norms. It is everywhere; it presents its own answers to each of life's judgments and decisions, thus relieving Dasein from responsibility; it allows Dasein to be comfortably dissolved into a collective being; it prescribes Dasein's everyday way of being.[6] In its everyday life, Dasein can be swallowed up into "the one" and turn over its individuality to everyday intelligibility, resulting in falling. Dasein's fundamental

---

[3] Carman 14.
[4] Heidegger 33 (H13).
[5] Dreyfus 90.
[6] Heidegger 163–168 (H126–129).

mode of being, being-in-the-world, which presupposes an interaction with things and other Dasein that "the one" can easily take over, thus creates an environment conducive to falling. Indeed, Heidegger goes so far as to write, "Being-in-the-world is always fallen."[7]

The phenomenon of falling shows up in Dasein's everdayness. That is to say, falling infects the manner of living which Dasein naturally exhibits in the course of its daily routine. In this mode of being, Dasein falls into a meaningful referential totality that absorbs its inhabitants through curiosity, ambiguity, and idle talk—phenomena that will be discussed shortly.[8] Put succinctly, these three constitutive features of falling have two inevitable results: the impediment of self-understanding and the leading of Dasein into inauthentic existence. Because our self-understanding is a function of how we interact with the world, and inauthentic Dasein always interprets itself as nothing more than a member of *das Man*, falling thus precludes a genuine realization of who we are. Moreover, if Dasein chooses to found its existence on an authentic way of interpreting and responding to the world, then falling impedes this choice by replacing it with a prefabricated worldview. Falling, then, causes us "[to] not take the time to explore anything thoroughly for ourselves. We use routines and passing interests to avoid committing ourselves to clear choices about who we are and what we are doing."[9]

The first characteristic of falling that covers genuine self-understanding is idle talk. Idle talk refers to the fallen manner in which Dasein communicates with others and through which it betrays a specific interpretation of the world. The underlying worldly interpretations found in idle talk are drawn from the collective interpretations of "the one," and they constantly deliver Dasein over to the possibilities of average understanding and their related dispositions.[10] When Dasein is delivered to the public conscience, it can still talk about things superficially, but at the expense of all deeper

---

[7] Ibid. 181.
[8] Ibid. 219–220 (H175–176).
[9] Polt 76.
[10] Heidegger 211 (H167–168).

understanding; the object spoken of is only linked to the audible words spoken and no rich meaning exists behind the vocal façade. Idle talk lacks any ground in the genuine world, and one can only pass on information as gossip and hearsay. Idle talk deceives Dasein into believing that it can have a legitimate understanding of everything without having first to put forth an effort to appropriate it.[11] The use of idle talk in Dasein's everydayness leads to a phenomenon that Heidegger calls "leveling." Leveling is akin to dumbing down a concept to the level of the least intelligent so that all will understand it. In leveling, "everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. Every secret loses its force."[12] The collective knowledge of "the one," on which idle talk is built, is nothing more than popular, passed-along facts, sound bytes, and over-simplified concepts. It is leveled down, cutting off all connections to deeper meanings, so that any and all Dasein can claim its knowledge. These easily grasped facts serve as readily available substitutes for any genuine under-standing of the world that Dasein might attempt—an understanding in which Dasein may discover itself. Thus idle talk, which leads to a leveled understanding lost in "the one," covers real self-understanding and pro-duces an inauthentic existence.

Idle talk and leveling, although they may appear capable of corrupt-ing only the ignorant masses, are viruses that can also infect the highest lev-els of society's intelligentsia. Heidegger does not distinguish between those who, by societal standards, are more or less educated; all are susceptible. For example, imagine a young philosophy professor who has just received his doctorate and is hired at a local university to teach an introductory phi-losophy course. If, when he gets to the point in the course where he must introduce some of the more difficult philosophies, such as Hegel's, he sim-ply regurgitates the facts found in introductory commentaries, then he has

---

[11] The above information, as well as many more details of idle talk, can be found in ibid. 211–214 (H168–170).
[12] Ibid. 165 (H127).

fallen victim to idle talk and leveling. He has put forth no effort to gain a primordial understanding of the philosophers' works. Instead, he wholly trusts that the few sentences written by someone other than the original philosopher can adequately grasp the essence of a concept that may have taken volumes to explain fully. The commentator's opinions, however, may be completely off the mark. For that matter, every contemporary philosopher's opinions on the subject may also be wrong. But our young professor unconsciously takes their words as infallible truth and passes off a purely superficial understanding to his class. Why does he act in such a way? Because that is *what one does* when one is a young professor in any subject; one does not often challenge the entrenched explanations, and the cycle of idle talk is perpetuated.

Curiosity and ambiguity, similar to idle talk, have the ability to cut Dasein off from a genuine understanding of itself and its world and can entrap Dasein in an inauthentic existence. Curiosity causes Dasein to leap continually from one worldly object to the next, no sooner discovering something before consigning it to the past and moving on to the next object that catches its fancy. The new object is caught in Dasein's attention only because it is new "rather than because of any aspect of its true nature."[13] Curiosity impedes one from ever pausing long enough to seriously contemplate one's place in the world and the meaning of the relationships one shares with surrounding objects. Ambiguity only compounds the problem that curiosity poses. Heidegger writes of ambiguity, "When . . . we encounter the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone [that is, when one is absorbed in curiosity and idle talk] . . . it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not."[14] Ambiguity is thus defined as not discerning between that which is genuine and that which is not. Furthermore, "this ambiguity extends not only to the world, but . . . even to Dasein's Being towards itself."[15]

In a fallen state, ambiguity combines with idle talk and curiosity to level off Dasein's understanding of itself and the world. An inauthentic life

[13] Mulhall 153.
[14] Heidegger 217 (H173).
[15] Ibid.

is the natural consequence of remaining in this average everydayness, one in which "the one" dictates the way Dasein interprets itself and the world, and in which real, personal decisions are relinquished to the collective social conscience. Falling is an elusive blockade, ever-present at each juncture wherein Dasein might, by chance, stumble upon a method to break out of its inauthentic existence. Is Dasein consigned to continually face this obstacle? If so, is Dasein able to realize its ultimate goal of living an authentic life?

Is Dasein Predisposed toward Falling?

With the structural definition of falling established, one must now address the question of *why* Dasein falls. Is it a *conscious* surrender to "the one"? Is Dasein *forced* into this mode of being by its environment? Or is Dasein merely predisposed to that sort of living? If either of the two latter possibilities are true, is there a way to escape one's fallen state? I will now turn to the task of showing that Dasein *is* predisposed to fall for two interrelated reasons. First, falling is constitutive of Dasein's default mode of being. Second, Dasein naturally leans towards falling because "the one" regulates this default mode of being.

The first hint that the temptation to fall is an inherent part of Dasein's being lies in the fact that it is constitutive of Dasein's undifferentiated state—the state prior to both inauthentic and authentic existence. These two basic modes of living are derived from how one reacts to the ever-present temptation to fall. Moreover, as explained above, Dasein's being can be described as Being-in-the-world because, in each case, it first finds itself thrown into a world. Falling is a fundamental part of this world and "Dasein initially . . . finds itself in its everyday fallen condition."[16] Dasein does not personally create the world that it is initially thrown into. Rather, *das Man* structures the world's categories, meanings, and roles in an inherently impersonal way—a structure that allows idle talk, curiosity,

---

[16] Carman 17.

and ambiguity to dominate Dasein's everyday life. Because of this state, "absorption in the they-self will be its [Dasein's] *default position*."[17] Dasein is further susceptible to falling because it does not consciously choose this primordial state and, once fallen, it often does not know that fallenness has swallowed up its being. This is because falling is, in Heideggerian terms, "tranquillizing."[18] Briefly, idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity all carry a false certainty that their communications are genuine and true; they convince Dasein that its falling is an authentic mode of being. We are sedated, and this deceptive guarantee suppresses any further need for Dasein to seek a genuine self-understanding, leading to its enslavement in the public conscience of "the one."

Tranquilizing illuminates the role of "the one" in predisposing Dasein towards falling. In its basic fallen state, "the self is lost in ['the one.'] It understands itself in terms of those possibilities of existence which 'circulate' in the 'average' public way of interpreting Dasein today."[19] Dasein inherits a fallen society from its past that automatically and unconsciously socializes it into a world of prefabricated norms, rules, and morals. Stephen Mulhall writes, "This ambiguity is not the conscious goal of any given individual; but in a public world dominated by idle talk and curiosity, it permeates the understanding into which Dasein already finds itself thrown."[20] Thus, Dasein necessarily and involuntarily grounds its beliefs regarding the world in "the one." Furthermore, Dasein pursues an inauthentic or authentic course of life, i.e., interprets upon possibilities opened up by the one's understanding of that world into which he is thrown, by utterly depending on what Heidegger labels "discourse." Taylor Carman describes discourse as the practical vocabulary of communicative comportments into which one is habituated and which allows the everyday world to

---

[17] Mulhall 108 (italics in original).
[18] See Heidegger 221–223 (H177–178) for a fuller account of tranquilizing.
[19] Heidegger 435 (H383).
[20] Mulhall 106.

be readily interpretable.[21] Discourse is the vernacular of each particular world, and one's mode of living, i.e., interacting in each specific world, consequently depends on the source of this discourse, which unsurprisingly turns out to originate in the dictates of "the one." In Dasein's first state, it makes sense of itself and the world, thus allowing a future of possibilities to open up, by interpreting itself on the basis of the banal and leveled off discourse of "the one."[22] As hard as it may try, Dasein cannot conceive of expressing or discovering itself outside of the world's social and cultural restraints.

Following this line of logic, Dasein is obviously predisposed to fall: it is always thrown into a society shaped, prior to any of Dasein's interpretations, by the discourse of "the one." Dasein is unwittingly sucked into the public conscience that tranquilizes and lulls it into a false sense of security through idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. In other words, Dasein is trapped in a downward spiral of falling. Furthermore, Dasein is not merely predisposed towards falling in its basic undifferentiated and inauthentic states only. Even in an authentic mode of being, achieved in a process that will be described shortly, Dasein is always vulnerable to receding back into a fallen state. As Heidegger writes, "Dasein's facticity is such that *as long as it is what it is*, Dasein remains in the throw, and is sucked into the turbulence of the 'they's' ['the one's'] inauthenticity."[23] Falling is "an ongoing dynamic tendency, a perpetual pull away from authentic existence."[24] How, then, is Dasein to escape from inauthenticity into authenticity?

Existential Implications

In Heidegger's philosophy, life is composed of possibilities. Each Dasein must appropriate, understand, and interpret the world it is thrown

---

[21] Carman 19.
[22] Ibid. 21.
[23] Heidegger 223 (H179).
[24] Carman 17.

into. The last task entails making choices based on one's past and present understanding of itself and the world. At every moment, man instantiates certain possibilities and rejects others. Taking responsibility for the world into which one has been involuntarily thrown, and making the most of it, constitutes authentic existence. Dasein's life is thus determined by how it reacts to its primordial fallen state, and its legacy is a function of the choices made in this life.

Human existence necessarily exhibits some sort of inherent reflexivity. As Heidegger states, Dasein's existence is "*in each case mine.*"[25] This "mineness" implies that each person has the fundamental responsibility to confront his fallen state and to make something out of it. One cannot be apathetic about one's existence, but must always be actively involved in creating and shaping one's life. We all start out in an undifferentiated state and, because existence is in each individual's responsibility, each has to choose one of two routes: inauthenticity or authenticity.

Inauthentic existence is dependent on falling for its continuation; it is a mode of that undifferentiated state of being brought about by succumbing to falling's temptations and giving one's self wholly over to "the one." As a tranquilizing refuge from self-understanding, Dasein escapes responsibility in inauthenticity. It is the mode of being that "is completely fascinated by the 'world' . . . in the 'they.'"[26] Fascination is to be understood as losing oneself in curiosity and being absorbed in worldly things. For example, a typical girl in high school might return home every day and immediately turn on MTV. She might spend four or five hours every day watching its various programs, and her life seemingly revolves around the television schedule. After a time, she begins to make decisions, both trivial and important, based on the culture that she perceives in the MTV world. Her speech, the clothes she chooses to wear, her relationship with her parents and other authority figures, and her self-understanding are all rooted in this world. She has become fascinated with MTV, has

---

[25] Heidegger 67 (H41).
[26] Ibid. 220 (H176).

become absorbed in its world, and has turned herself over to "the one"—allowing the collective conscience to make her decisions for her in hopes of becoming a part of the MTV world. Most people will readily admit that this example suggests an inauthentic (using the conventional sense of the word) way of living; our student is not making choices for herself but has fallen to the MTV mode of being-in-the-world. Heidegger would also agree that this lifestyle is inauthentic because she is not taking her own stand on the world, but rather trusts in the tranquilizing, leveled-off discourse that falling offers.

One serious consequence of this mode of living is its self-perpetuating nature. Because yielding to falling's temptations results in inauthenticity, tranquilizing is an integral part of Dasein's being-in-the-world. Tranquilizing's false security encourages its subjects to recruit others to join the collective conscience and to pass along their inauthentic life within the fallen society.

All is not lost, though. Albeit inauthenticity is the result of one's predispositions, it is not the only possibility. Like its inauthentic counterpart, authentic existence arises from Dasein's reaction to discovering his primordial fallen state. It is achieved by "letting oneself be summoned out of one's lostness in the 'they.'"[27] Just as inauthenticity is characterized by a *succumbing*, authenticity is primarily defined as a *resistance*. However, this resistance is not directed toward all things worldly. Indeed, authentic Dasein must continue living in the thrown world dominated by the dictates of "the one." The resistance referred to is directed towards fascination. Dasein cannot let itself, while being absorbed in the everyday world (as it should), become so fascinated so as to be taken over again by "the one" and lose its "primordial relation to its situation."[28] Indeed, inauthentic existence is nothing more than "relaxing the effort to put up active resistance to the force of falling."[29]

---

[27] Ibid. 345 (H299).
[28] Dreyfus 228.
[29] Carman 28.

To borrow Carman's example, authentic living is akin to living in a gravitational field. Just as one who lives on the earth can only walk upright in virtue of the planet's gravity and can continually resist the gravitational pull while never escaping its grasp, so too is the authentic Dasein able to instantiate its mode of being only because of the inauthentic current that runs against it. It is able to authentically survive in a societal construct based on "the one" while never fully escaping the pull that falling exerts on it.[30] Authenticity is constant resistance to the tendency to fall. In fact, authentic existence is such only because it possesses this ever-present tension. And, just as man is given the freedom to live a meaningful earthly life in virtue of gravity's ever-present force, man is freed to live an authentic life in virtue of the constant temptation to fall back into "the one."

Conclusion

A cursory examination of today's society will evince the fact that man is naturally found, in a Heideggerian sense, in a fallen state wherein the public conscience dictates one's actions. While one might be tempted to live one's life out in strict accordance with acceptable social norms, never seriously contemplating the road in life that one would like to pursue, this path does not lead to true happiness. Falling and inauthenticity are evident throughout every strata of society: elementary and junior high kids dress and act so as to increase their chances of being cool; college students join fraternities and subject themselves to the rules of the organization in hopes of finding acceptance, because that is *what one does* in college; lawyers incur large debts and place their marriages in financial jeopardy just so they can wear high-priced suits and drive luxury cars to impress their clients (after all, that is *what one does* when one is a lawyer); churchgoers mechanically attend their meetings and give offerings because that is *what one does* when one joins a faith. Today's world is replete with examples of inauthentic existence, yet mankind is not doomed to this robotic fate.

---

[30] For a fuller explanation of this analogy, please see Carman 8.

In conclusion, we return to the engineer introduced at the opening of this essay. The question of why he acted in such a way so as to succumb to peer pressure has been illuminated and cast in a different light for the reader. We now see that the young student, since the time he became socially conscious, inherited a fallen past world. This world, framed by inauthentic discourse, predisposed him to heed "the one's" counsel—imbedded in idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity—in determining his life's path. Following this leveled-down direction inevitably lead him to an inauthentic mode of being. In other words, he was naturally inclined, from the beginning, to be ensnared in a fallen state of existence. However, all is not lost for our friend. One's actions are relatively unimportant; the authentic life, based on a unique stand on the world, can produce the same actions as the inauthentic life. It is the personal exertion to live one's own life that provides true freedom. By realizing that his life is *his* to live, and no one else's, and by accepting the fact that he has to take responsibility for a heritage and society uncreated by him, yet into which he as been thrown, our example can make personal choices based on how *he* has decided to take a stand on the world and, in so doing, can discover true happiness.

References

Carman, Taylor. "Must We Be Inauthentic?" in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity*. Ed. Mark A. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. San Francisco: Harper, 1962.

Mulhall, Stephen. *Heidegger and Being and Time*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Polt, Richard. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.